

JOHN ORSON KEMPLE

An Autobiography

1876 - 1950

Editors Note: This Autobiography was taken from the hand written papers of John Orson Kemple.

I was born on August 8th 1876 in St. George, Utah to John Kemple and Amelia Leicht. My father was a prospector and miner and was operating a mine in Silver Reef, Utah. My father was born in New Jersey and when a small child moved with his parents to West Virginia, near Wheeling. After his mother died, his father remarried. Because of difficulties getting along with a new stepmother, father left home at the tender age of 15 years and came to California in the year 1850 in the midst of the gold rush. He followed every new mining camp that was started until he finally wound up in Harrisburg, Utah some time in the early 1860's. While there, he made the discovery of silver in the sandstone which spawned the notorious town and mines of Silver Reef, Utah. Later he met and married my mother, Amelia Leicht, the ceremony being performed by Elder Orson Adams at the home of Ben Paddock in the little village of Middleton, Utah located between St. George and Washington, on October 4, 1874.

My mother was born in England in 1856 and immigrated to America and on to Utah in 1864 at the age of 8 years. Her family was converted to the Latter-day Saint faith and they settled in or near St. George where she grew into womanhood having had many thrilling experiences with Indians and the settling of a new town in those pioneer times. After mother and father were married they made their home in Silver Reef where father was employed in the mines.

Some of my earliest memories are of the whistles on the mills at Silver Reef, and my father letting me pull the string to make it blow. Another memory is of a visit to friends by the name of Hamilton in Harrisburg. My father had let me play with his pipe (he was a smoker), and I dropped it behind the door step and couldn't get it out. I had to get father and lead him out by tugging at his finger to show him where the pipe was hidden. My first playmate was a boy a little older than I. His name was Belt Daily, and my mother recalls the first word I ever spoke was "Belt". Other early memories were of having the Whooping Cough and the coughing spells, which were miserable.

In 1879, when I was three years old, my father moved us to South Star in Beaver County, where he had a mining interest and where we were out away from everybody. We had to have our water hauled ten miles by wagon and our nearest neighbor was over a mile away. lived there about six years and I have many pleasant childhood memories, most of them are not worthwile mentioning here, but it was quite an event in my young life to go visiting our neighbors on Sundays. There were the Ustons, who had a couple of boys, one about my age and one about the age of my brother, George. They had a little red express wagon and we had many happy hours playing with it. The only kind of wagon I had was a home made one made from a wooden box that my father had made for me, sawing the wheels from a piece of lumber.

We had another neighbor by the name of Barrett who had a little girl named JoAnn. She was some younger than I but I thought she was about the nicest thing that ever was. Barrett's lived in the next gulch west of us about a mile away.

My father used to take me with him once in a while when he would go to Frisco, a mining camp some miles from where we lived and the journey was made on foot, my father carrying me part of the way on his back. We would stay at a hotel overnight.

There was snow in the winter and there was a steep hill side close to our house. One time when the snow was frozen and hard on the surface I got the idea to ride a tin plate down that slope. I sat down on it and started down. The friction heated up the plate and I had some nice blisters on my bottom as a result.

My brother George, and I were playing one day near a mine shaft which father was starting and which was about eight feet deep. George got too close to the edge and fell in the hole and cut his head pretty bad. I was afraid that mother would punish me for it and tried to wash the blood from his face in some dirty wash water that father used for drill water, after mother was through using it to wash clothes. Mother heard George crying and got us to the house and bandaged him up and I got off without punishment.

I had many other happy experiences at South Star such as raising rabbits, catching rats, gathering wild flowers and so on, but they are too numerous to mention. We lived there until I was about nine years old. My three sisters were born there. They were Ada, Emma, and Effie. We moved back to Silver Reef in 1885.

It was in Silver Reef that I spent the most wonderful carefree days of my life. We children ran wild like Indians and in the summer us boys spent our time swimming, hunting, and trapping quail and grey squirrels. Fighting wasps was one of our favorite pastimes and many is the time I have got stung good and plenty, but that only served to make us want to get revenge. In fruit season us boys would start out in the morning and go down the creek to Harrisburg where we would fill up on fruit at Grandpa Adams place. Then we would take a trip down Harrisburg canyon and then back and fill up on fruit again at Harrisburg. We would then go up toward Leeds to the Connelley's, who were great friends of the family. Long toward evening we would wind up back home ready for rest. Then we would go on and do the same thing over the next day.

My schooling has been very limited. I started in school in Beaver at the age of nine years and attended there about two months in the first reader then we moved to Silver Reef I attended grammar school there until I reached the second reader (part of the winter of 1886). The winter of 1887 I went to grammar school in Harrisburg, Utah going through the third reader. (In those days we did not go by grades). Frank Morse of St. George was my teacher. The winters of 1888 to 1891 I attended grammar school again in Silver Reef and went through the fifth reader. I then moved back to Beaver, Utah and went to grammar school there a part of the winter of 1890, which ended my school days. I never passed the fifth reader.

There were lots of Indians around and I remember once there was a great gathering of them on a small flat about two hundred yards from our house. It was in the evening and the Indians kept coming with their women folk and children until the number was perhaps five or six hundred. Of course we did not know what was on foot and mother was very nervous about them. Finally father and a man he

had working for him, went to their camp to find out what was going on and found that there was to be a wedding of one of the chiefs daughters with one of the braves who aspired for her hand. The way they had of deciding which one would marry her was they drew three rings on the ground some twenty feet apart, and the rings probably measured twenty or twenty five feet across. Then one of the prospective grooms took his place in each ring and began to choose sides as if they were going to play some kind of game, each taking his turn calling who ever of the young men he wanted on his side, until they had a team of sufficient size to suit. I think maybe about 30 men in each ring all standing. On the ground between the three rings was drawn a small ring and the girl was taken out and placed in that ring by her father. One of the suitors from one of the rings stepped out and took the girl by the hand and arm and began to pull her out of the ring. Another man from one of the other rings took hold of her and began to pull to try to get her out on his side. Then one from the other ring would step in and take his leader round the waist and start pulling and one from the opposing ring, until one side would pull her out of the ring, which they did after nearly pulling the girl to pieces. All except the man who pulled her out, went back to their own ring and the man took the girl to his ring and stood with folded arms beside her.

Soon one man from one of the other rings came out and took the girl by the hand and led her out to the space between the rings and that was a challenge to the winner of the pull to first combat. When one was knocked out or had plenty, he would let another man from his ring take his place and the fight went on. Every time a man from any of the rings led the girl to the center, he was immediately attacked by one from the ring, which he had taken her from. There was no method or guarding off blows, it was just stand up and punch and give and take until one or the other had enough. They never lost their temper in spite of many broken noses and dislocated fingers and hands. This went on until the small hours of the morning when one of the suitors, a strapping fellow led her to the center and his challenge was not met. He looked round at all the rings and when no one came to meet him he gave a yell of victory which was taken up by all his side and he and the girl led a grand march up one side of the little valley and back the other. The whole tribe joined in the march and that ended the wedding and the Indians began to disburse.

I farmed in Beaver until 1895 when I left Utah and went to Arizona and took up mining at which occupation I spent thirty years. I have lived in Salt Lake City, Beaver, South Star, St. George, Harrisburg, and Silver Reef in Utah, and Chloride, Vivian, and Goldroad in Arizona. I lived for a short time in Los Angeles and Venice, California. Several years in Goodsprings, Nevada, before returning to my birthplace, St. George, Utah to retire.

Among the outstanding characters I have met are William H. Taft, President of the United States, Buffalo Bill, Bryan L. Bunker, President George Albert Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith and other Church leaders such as President Harold S. Snow of the St. George Temple, Anthony Ivins, Bishop Joseph L. Wirthlin and some others.